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THE OLD ROYALL HOUSE



BY

HELEN TILDEN WILD

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THE ROYALL HOUSE, AT MEDFORD.

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THE OLD ROYALL HOUSE.

By HELEN TILDEN WILD.

Nine years ago, the Sarah Bradlee Fulton Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, of Medford, Massachusetts, conceived the idea of preserving the old Royall House for the sake of its history and aesthetic worth.

For years the members of the chapter had been familiar with the outside of the building, but few had seen the interior. After holding a loan exhibition in the house and being in it more or less for a month in early spring, the charm of the place took possession of them and they resolved to influence public opinion to save it.

Two years later, in April, 1901, the chapter rented the house and opened it for the benefit and pleasure of the public. Becoming convinced that a larger organization with more far-reaching acquaintance was necessary, the chapter interested a group of patriotic men and women to form a corporation to purchase the building. As a result, the Royall House Association was incorporated in 1905. In April, 1907, an option upon the mansion, outbuildings and about three-quarters of an acre of land was obtained, and the Association began raising money for the purchase. Little by little the fund grew until, April 16, 1908, the one hundred thirty-third anniversary of the day when Colonel Isaac Royall left his beautiful residence never to return, the deed was obtained.

It is now proposed to open the house as a museum for ancient furniture, household utensils, relics, etc., all arranged to enhance the beauty of its architecture and to preserve its dignity. As time goes on, the house and slave quarters will be improved and the grounds laid out in the quaint old fashioned way. No mortgage encumbers the property, and it is fortunate that the build-

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ings are in such a state that all the changes contemplated need not be made at once. The annual income from membership fees in the association and contributions to the fund by visitors and others will determine the yearly improvement.

The mansion stands on Main Street, Medford, about midway between Winter Hill and Medford Square. It is the only building standing on land known as Ten Hills Farm, granted to Governor Winthrop in 1631, which dates back to the time when the holding retained its original boundaries. As early as 1637, the homestead lot was walled and cleared although on a map of that date no house is shown there. Very soon after, tenants and employees of Governor Winthrop were located at Ten Hills, but the places of their abodes are unknown. Probably part of the Royall House was one of them, the original building having been much plainer and smaller than it is at present. The heirs of Gov. John Winthrop, of Connecticut (who became the owner of the property between 1641 and 1645) sold it to Mrs. Elizabeth Lidgett who subsequently made it over to her son Charles.

The latter was an adherent of Andros, and when the unpopular governor was forced to leave the province, Colonel Lidgett was ordered to go with him. Because he had not carried out the terms of his mother's will, Lidgett became entangled in lawsuits brought by his brother-in-law, John Usher, and David Jeffries, the husband of Usher's daughter. Being unable to return to Massachusetts to conduct his affairs personally, the cases went by default; Jeffries took possession of the southerly part of the farm and Usher of the portion north of Winter Hill. Until 1754, the whole of the farm was in Charlestown; the present boundary between Medford and Somerville practically marks the line between the two estates as divided in 1692. In the correspondence of Lidgett and his agent we first find reference to the so-called Royall House. It was occupied at that time by Thomas Marrable, or Marble, who in 1690 had been a tenant there for several years.

The house was then a two story and a half one with dormer windows in the attics. There were two rooms on each floor and the dimensions, over all, were eighteen by forty-five feet. The west, north and south walls were of brick. After Usher came into possession, he enlarged it by building a leanto on the

west side, leaving the original brick wall to form the partition between the east and west rooms. A careful inspection of the brick work on the south wall of the building shows the outline of the original gable end. A little window which was in the leanto is different in finish from two others above, but not in line with it, and directs the attention to the second period in the evolution of the mansion. Usher made the estate his home until his death, in 1726, except when he was serving as lieutenant governor of New Hampshire and had his headquarters at Portsmouth. He, as well as Lidgett, was a follower of Andros; much personal animosity on the part of his neighbors was a consequence. In his young manhood he was very wealthy, having succeeded his father who made a fortune as a book-seller. To him were entrusted negotiations for the purchase of Maine by the province of Massachusetts from the heirs of Gorges. His success in this venture made him very popular until the advent of Andros. He married first the daughter of Mr. Peter Lidgett, a wealthy Boston merchant, and second, the daughter of George Allen, who bought the New Hampshire grants from the heirs of Mason. Allen was made governor of his province with Usher as his lieutenant.

Usher's home on the Mystic was a favorite tarrying place for the tories of the seventeenth century. The last of the governor's life was harrassed by business troubles and many lawsuits, most of which he lost. Some seem to have been brought about by his arrogant temper, but, whatever the rights of the case, the people had little liking for his principles and the juries may have been prejudiced. Just before his death he put his farm at Ten Hills out of his hands, but it was returned to his widow soon after he died.

Nine years later, in 1732, the estate was sold to Isaac Royall and since then it has borne his name. He immediately set about remodeling it. The house was made three story throughout; gardens were laid out; the slave quarters and summer house were built; a high wall enclosed the grounds on the highway, broken by a low wall and fence directly in front of the house. An elm shaded driveway led from the road to a paved court-yard on the west side of the house, and flower-bordered walks were made from the mansion to the summer-house on the west, and to the road on the east. The north side of the house was clapboarded and the garden front was paneled and embellished with

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hand carving. The street front does not seem to have been greatly changed from the facade built by Usher.

The interior was almost entirely rebuilt. On the garden side is the "best room," with paneled walls, carved pilasters and recessed windows. The sliding doors between this room and the east parlor were put in many years later, probably about 1845. The east parlor and the dining room, on the other side of the hall, are much plainer, some of the woodwork having been removed. The hall extends through the house and is finished with a high wainscot. The stairway is paneled and the bannisters are carved in three patterns; the newel post combines all three and is extremely graceful. At the foot of the stairs is an arch with carved ornaments. The original wainscot is seen in the kitchen, but the great fireplace has been bricked up. To restore this room is one of the cherished desires of the present owners.

Upstairs, over the west parlor is the "marble chamber," so called on account of the carving representing Corinthian columns. In its prime, this room was beautifully furnished; its walls were hung with embossed leather and it was furnished with a crimson silk damask bed with counterpane, and easy chair and cushion to match, three walnut chairs, a Turkey carpet, one pair brass arms, a "blew" hair trunk and a sconce. The whole, with the bedfurnishings, was valued, in 1739, at three hundred pounds. All the chambers had tiled fireplaces and were designated, according to the color of the tiles, the blue room, the green room, etc.

In the third story are two paneled rooms and two roughly plastered ones with beams across the ceiling; the larger one was called the spinning garret. This room seems to be unchanged, except the loss of the tiles; the twenty-four paned windows, wide floor boards, H and L hinges and heavy beams make these rooms seem older than any other part of the house. Over all, the great open attic could well be supposed to be the home of the spooks which the fastidious General Lee conjured up when he named the mansion "Hobgoblin Hall."

Isaac Royall lived seven years after he bought the estate, but the alterations were so elaborate that five years were consumed in rebuilding, and he lived in the house only two years. At his death the place came into the possession of his son, Isaac.

The Royalls were descendants of William Royall, cooper and cleaver of timber, who came to Salem under the patronage of Governor Cradock. Isaac, Senior, became a planter in Antigua, one of the Leeward Islands, and enlarged his business by trading. His summer home was in Dorchester, and it is a tradition there that the importation of slaves contributed to his wealth. After he came to Ten Hills, he gave up this business and brought to his new home only tried and faithful family servants. About twenty-five came with him and were presumably, except the body servants, housed in the building known as the slave quarters. The brick part of this building was called the "out kitchen;" the basement was used as a dairy after 1800 and was probably built for that purpose.

The summer house, at the end of the garden, was octagonal with carved pilasters, bell shaped roof and cupola surmounted by a winged Mercury, which swung as a weather vane. The figure was a fine piece of carving nearly five feet high. The building stood on an artificial mound, within which was a walled cellar entered by a trap door, which added great mystery to the structure. They used to tell us that the dark hole was a prison for slaves, but the use of it for storage purposes was much more practical, though less romantic. The arched windows of the garden house made it a pleasant place in all weathers except the most severe, and the tender sentiments scratched upon them suggest tales of love. But during the siege of Boston lovers were displaced by stern soldiers who held councils of war there.

For nearly forty years the home of Royall was a rallying place of social life. The house stood on the highroad from Boston to Salem and no one of importance was expected to pass by without alighting. Colonel Royall's sister, Penelope, married Henry Vassall; his niece, Elizabeth Oliver, was the wife of John Vassall, who built the Longfellow house in Cambridge. His daughters married Sir William (Sparhawk) Pepperell and George Erving. All were staunch loyalists, and Royall's close connection with these families had much to do with his subsequent unfortunate history; but his benevolence and public services before the Revolution can now be viewed unobstructed by the war clouds of his day.

From 1743 to 1752, Royall served as deputy to the General Court and

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regularly returned his salary to the treasury of the town of Charlestown. He presented to the colony the chandelier which adorned the legislative chamber. For sixteen years he was chairman of the Board of Selectmen in Charlestown, and when his estate was set off to Medford, he served there in the same offices. He was moderator of town meeting when resolutions against the stamp act were passed and used his influence toward the repeal of the law. From 1752 to 1774, he was a member of the Governor's Council. With Hancock, Otis, Bowdoin and Lady Temple, he was owner of a large tract of land in Worcester County, which was later called Royalston in his honor. He subscribed twenty-five pounds toward building a meeting-house there and presented the pulpit Bible. He gave generously for the benefit of church and schools in Charlestown and Medford, and when Harvard Hall was burned, in 1764, and with it the entire college library, he contributed a large sum to make good the loss. He bequeathed a large tract of land to Harvard College. The property was sold, according to the provisions of the will, and, in 1815, the proceeds were used to establish the Royall Professorship of Law, which was followed two years later by the Harvard Law School.

When the troubles of 1775 were at hand, Colonel Royall and his sister, Penelope Vassall thought it best to retire to their West Indian estates until the storm had blown over. They accordingly made plans to that effect, but were deterred by the sudden blow struck at Lexington. The Sunday before the battle, Royall rode to Boston in his chariot, to attend service at King's Chapel and to bid his friends goodby. He unfortunately staid too long and was caught a prisoner in the town when the order of General Gage forbade any one to leave. His desire to quit the province could only be carried out by boarding an English ship for Halifax. Taking lodgings at Windsor, Nova Scotia, he waited in vain for a vessel bound for Antigua; finally, when his daughter, Mrs. Erving, and her husband arrived after the evacuation of Boston, they persuaded him to go with them to England. On account of failing health, he never left Kensington where he made his home, dying there in 1781. His sister, being a non-combatant, was allowed to go south, taking any of her personal belongings except her medicine chest, which was reserved for the use of the surgeons in the Continental Army.

In Medford, the members of the first Committee of Safety were friends of Colonel Royall and probably he would never have been disturbed if he had remained at home. His estate, "one of the Grandest in North America," was left unprotected, but Dr. Simon Tufts, of Medford, exerted himself to care for it. General Stark, the commander of the New Hampshire troops, was detailed to occupy it as headquarters. Lee and Sullivan, whose commands were at Winter Hill, were there for a short time, but were ordered by Washington to make their headquarters nearer their brigades. For a short time "Mollie" Stark presided as mistress of the house. On the day of the evacuation of Boston, she watched from a little outlook built against the south chimney to discover any movement of the enemy toward crossing the river and proceeding around Boston to attack the Americans in the rear. Her orders were to send messengers to alarm the country if she saw anything to arouse suspicion. The short flight of stairs by which she climbed to the roof are to be seen today, but the little watch tower disappeared years ago.

In less than a week after the evacuation, Stark was in New York and the Royall House was empty. As the war progressed, laws were made in regard to the property of absentees which scattered Colonel Royall's household goods beyond hope of recovery. Two auctions were held for the benefit of the government. A set of candlesticks, owned and valued in a Boston family, are the only authentic relics known of the furnishings of his home. The real estate was confiscated but not sold, being occupied by wealthy tenants, who were able to take care of the estate, until 1792, when the government surrendered the title to Elizabeth Hutton a daughter of Elizabeth (Royall) Pepperell.

In 1804, a syndicate began negotiations for the property, but all formalities were not completed till two years later. Some of the outlying portions were sold, a few houses were built and streets laid out. William Welch, a Boston manufacturer, owned the homestead for about four years previous to 1810, when he sold to Francis Cabot Lowell, the founder of cotton manufacturing in America. In the summer of the same year, he sold the house and garden and about two acres on either side to Jacob Tidd, who eventually acquired the greater part of the Royall real estate. He occupied the place as a summer residence and made a specialty of fruit and flower culture. After his death, Mrs.

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Tidd made the farm her permanent home and resided there for fifty years. She was a sister of William Dawes, who rode from Boston to Concord "on the eighteenth of April, seventy-five," to spread the news of the coming of the British.

Mrs. Tidd enlarged her mansion by building the north wing for the accommodation of her youngest daughter when she married in 1823. The outside shows that it was built for utility rather than beauty, but the inside is more in keeping with the rest of the house and is hardly more modern. With the death of Mrs. Tidd, the glory of the estate departed, but even today, great trees, children of those planted by the Royall's shade the roof; vines clamber over the weather stained walls; the peonies bloom in the flower borders, and even in decay the old house is beautiful. It is a monument to its former proprietors and the times they represent. Few houses can boast such a succession of eminent owners and few have stood for nearly two centuries with so few changes in architecture. It is bequeathed to the people of Massachusetts by those who had a part in the making of the Commonwealth, and to the men and women of today is given the duty and privilege of preserving it for future generations.

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